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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the sounds in American English and Brazilian Portuguese in crder to focus on the problems that Brazilian students may encounter when learning to speak English. The comparative analysis of the consonants, vowels, and diphthongs describes how a given sound is pronounced in both languages. Particular problem sounds for the Brazilian student are mentioned and steps for teaching and learning these sounds are indicated. The author maintains that overcoming these difficulties requires knowledge of the organs of speech and of how they operate in both languages; contrasting sounds should be taught together s that students can hear, identify, and produce the sounds. (VM)

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FROM BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE TO AMERICAN ENGLISH:

PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS AND DRILLS

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Table of Contents:

Page

I - Introduction 1

II - The sounds of English and Brazilian Portuguese .. 2

Consonants Analysis 3

Vowels Analysis 11

Diphthongs .....-15

III - Some Difficulties 16

IV - An Attempt to overcome such Difficulty 17

Methodological Aspects 17

Exercises 19

I - INTRODUCTION

In the teaching of any foreign language one of the most important and sometimes difficult tasks is that which deals with pronunciation.

The acquisition of a good pronunciation depends on how correctly it is heard by the learner.

It is known that when anyone speaks he uses certain parts of his mouth, like lips, tongue, as well as his nose, throat and diaphragm in order to produce the sounds of a language.

The native speaker of a language does not have difficulty in using its sounds correctly, once he has acquired habits of pronunciation in his childhood and has been practicing since then. These habits are so automatic that when the native speaker of a language says something he is not worried about the position of his tongue but thinking on what he is saying.

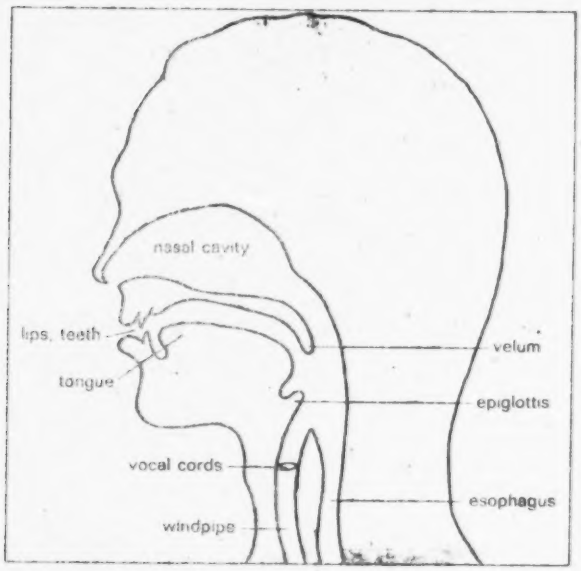
However, the motions of the organs of speech, also called the vocal organs, differ from language to language, and when someone learns a new language he has to acquire its sounds step by step, conscious of what he is doing, since he does not have the necessary habits.

Based on what was said above, the sound system of the new language to be learned and how these sounds are produced in the organs of speech are knowledges required in foreign language teaching.

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to show how the English and the Brazilian Portuguese sounds are pronounced and how the difficulty of the Brazilian students in producing some English sounds could be solved or, at least, attenuated.

II - THE SOUNDS OF ENGLISH AND BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

The sounds of any language have two main classification: consonants and vowels. They are produced in the organs of speech, which is showing in the diagram below.



In this section the differences between the sounds of English and Brazilian Portuguese are shown. It is divided in two parts: (1) consonants analysis and (2) vowels analysis, in which are included the diphthongs.

The sound transcription is based on the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet).

1 - Consonants Analysis

The consonants are classified according to the manner of articulation, their production with voice or with voiceless breath and their acoustic value.

Concerning articulation they can be divided into stops (or plosives) and continuants. In the production of the stop sounds the breath is restrained in its external movement and released with a slight explosion. According to the articulation a stop can be bilabial - when articulated with the lips - dental, alveolar, palatal or velar when the articulation is made with the tongue against the upper teeth, the alveolar ridge, the palate or the velum, respectively. The stops is also classified in aspirated, when a puff of air accompanied the articulation, or unaspirated, when it does not occur.

The continuants are the sounds which are prolonged in their articulation. In this group there are the nasal, produced in the nasal cavity, fricatives and lateral.

It is said that a consonant is voiced when it is produced with the vibration of the vocal cords, and voiceless when this

vibration does not occur.

After this superficial explanation about consonants, let us begin their analysis.

/b/ - bilabial, stop, oral, voiced. It is produced by closing the lips and then opening them to make a voiced sound. It is the same sound both in English and Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. bola /bɔla/ Eng. big /big/

/p/ - bilabial, stop, oral, voiceless, aspirated. It is produced in English by closing the lips and then blowing them open with a puff of air without voice. This sound in English has three kinds of aspiration: strong, middle and weak. In Brazilian Portuguese, however, there is no aspiration wherever it occurs in a word. It is pronounced almost in the same way as the English /p/ in the word spit.

B.P. pena /pena/ Eng. pen /pɛn/

/m/ - bilabial, continuant, voiced, nasal. It is produced by pressing the lips together and making the sound with voice. It is pronounced almost in the same way in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. mudo /mUdU/ Eng. make /mek/

/w/ - labial, continuant, voiced, oral, rounded. It is produced by pushing the lips forward and blowing out with a voiced sound. The letter w does not exist in the Portuguese Alphabet and it is just used in a phonetic transcription as a semivowel.

B.P. agua /agwa/ Eng. work /wɝk/

/f/ - labiodental, continuant, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by biting the inside of the lower lip with the upper front teeth and blowing out with a voiceless sound. It is the same sound in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. fato /fatU/ Eng. flat /flæt/

/v/ - labiodental, continuant, voiced, oral, fricative. It is produced in the same way as /f/, just making a voiced sound. It is pronounced in the same way in Brazilian Portuguese as it is in English.

B.P. vaso /vazU/ Eng. visit /vɪzɪt/

/θ/ - interdental, continuant, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by putting the tip of the tongue against the cutting edge of the upper teeth and then blowing out the breath without voice. This sound does not exist in Brazilian Portuguese and when the learner try to pronounce it he often mixes it up with /t/ or /s/.

B.P. --- Eng. thank /θæŋk/

/ / - interdental, continuant, voiced, oral, fricative. It is produced in the same way as the sound /s/, just blowing out the breath with voice. It does not exist in Brazilian Portuguese and it is often mixed up with /z/.

B.P. --- English: that /ðæt/

/d/ - alveolar, stop, voiced, oral. It is produced by placing the tip of the tongue on the gum ridge behind the upper front teeth and blowing the tongue sharply away making a voiced sound. In Brazilian Portuguese, however, this sound is dental instead of alveolar, and it is produced by placing the tip of the tongue behind the upper front teeth, blowing the tongue away making a voiced sound.

B.P. dado /dadU/ Eng. desk /dɛsk/

/t/ - alveolar, stop, voiceless, oral, aspirated. It is produced by putting the tip of the tongue on the gum ridge behind the upper teeth and blowing the tongue sharply away without voice, but with aspiration (when it occurs in the beginning of a word). This sound has almost the same characteristic of the /d/ sound in Brazilian Portuguese, that is, it is dental, not aspirated, but it is voiceless.

B.P. teatro /tyatrU/ Eng. table /tebəl/

/n/ - alveolar, continuant, voiced, nasal. It is produced by placing the tip of the tongue to the alveolar ridge keeping the sides of the tongue touching the inside of the upper teeth and sending the voiced sound through the nose. It occurs in the same way in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. nada /nadɑ/ Eng. noon /nun/

/l/ - alveolar, continuant, voiced, oral, lateral. It is produced by placing the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge, letting the voiced breath come over the sides of the tongue. It has the same characteristic in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. lado /dadU/ Eng. like /laIk/

/r/ - post-alveolar, voiced, oral. It is produced by raising the tongue and curling it toward the beginning of the hard palate without letting it touch the palate or move while the breath is being blown out with voice. In Brazilian Portuguese, however, this sound has two differents kind of pronunciation depending upon its position in the words. When it occurs between vowels it is slightly rolled and has the same pronunciation as the Spanish /r/ in pero, but if it is doubled or it occurs in the beginning or in the end of words it is pronounced almost like

the English /h/, without aspiration. Yet it does not have an exact correspondence to any sound in English.

B.P. cara /cara/ Eng. race /res/

/s/ - alveolar, continuant, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by raising the tongue-tip to the alveolar ridge and making a sibilated voiceless sound. It has the same characteristic in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. sala /sala/ Eng. same /sem/

/z/ - alveolar, continuant, voiced, oral, fricative. It is produced by raising the tongue-tip to the alveolar ridge, making a buzzing voiced sound. It is the same sound in Brazilian Portuguese. Yet, when it occurs in the end of the word i- is pronounced like /s/.

B.P. casa /kaza/ Eng. zero /zIro/

/ʃ/ - palatal, continuant, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by putting the front of the tongue on the upper gum ridge and making a voiceless "shh" sound. It occurs in Brazilian Portuguese in the same way as in English.

B.P. cha /ʃa/ Eng. ship /ʃIp/

/ʒ/ - palatal, continuant, voiced, oral, fricative. It is produced by raising the front of the tongue to the upper gum ridge, making a voiced buzzing sound. It has the same characteristic in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. juiz /ʒUIs/ Eng. pleasure /plɛʒɚ/

/tʃ/ - palatal, stop, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by raising the front of the tongue to the upper gum ridge, gliding the two sounds together in a voiceless sound. It only occurs in some dialects of the Brazilian Portuguese when the phoneme /t/ is followed by /I/ being pronounced almost like the English /t/ in the word cheese.

B.P. tia /tʃIa/ Eng. choice /tʃɔIs/

/dʒ/ - palatal, stop, voiced, oral, fricative. It is produced in the same way as /tʃ/, but with a voiced sound. It does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. joke-/dʒok/

/y/ - palatal, continuant, voiced, oral. It is produced by raising the middle of the tongue to the palate, forcing the breath out with voice. The letter y does not exist in the Portuguese Alphabet. It is used in phonetic transcription to indicate a semi-vowel.

B.P. teia /teya/ Eng. yet /yɛt/

/k/ - velar, stop, voiceless, oral, aspirated (in the beginning of words or in stressed position). It is produced by raising the back of the tongue to touch the soft palate in a rapid contact, making a voiceless sound. It is the same sound in Brazilian Portuguese with no aspiration. (The letter k does not exist in Portuguese alphabet.)

B.P. caneta /kaneta/ Eng. can /kæn/

/g/ - velar, stop, voiced, oral. It is produced in the same way as the sound /k/, but making a voiced sound. It also occurs in Brazilian Portuguese with the same characteristics of the English sound.

B.P. gota /gɔta/ Eng. good /gʊd/

/ŋ/ - velar, continuant, voiced, nasal. It is produced by raising the back of the tongue toward the soft palate (without letting it strike the roof of the mouth), making a voiced nasal sound. It does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. king /kɪŋ/

/h/ - glottal, continuant, voiceless, oral, fricative. It is produced by the passing of the breath stream through the glottis, without voice. This sound does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese and the written letter h, although used in many words, is always silent.

B.P. --- Eng. hat /hæt/

2 - Vowel Analysis

The sound of all vowels is emitted through the mouth. Therefore their production depends on the position of the mouth - opened or closed - the lips movement - into a spread, neutral or rounded position - and the elevation of the tongue - toward the front, central, or back part of the palate.

The tongue position for the vowels runs from the front to the back of the mouth in areas which are known as front, central and back. Going from top to bottom the areas are knowing as high, mid and low.

All vowels are voiced, i.e, produced with the vibration of the vocal cords, and they differ from the consonants in that the external stream of sound is not restricted, whereas in consonants this flux of sound is interrupted or diverted by one of the articulators: lips, tongue, teeth or soft palate.

There are, in general, twelve vowel sounds in English. (This number varies depending on their classification by different phoneticians.) However in Brazilian Portuguese there are only seven vowel sounds, which makes it difficult for the Brazilian speaker to produce the other five.

The diphthongs do not represent difficulty in their production since there are equivalents for them in Brazilian Portuguese.

Let us begin with the vowels.

/i/ - high, front. That is, the highest part of the tongue is in the front of the mouth. It is produced by raising the tongue high in the mouth and tensing the muscles of the tongue and cheeks. Draw the lips back in a "smile" and make a voiced sound. It does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese at all.

B.P. --- Eng. beat /bit/

/I/ - high, front. It is produced by raising the tongue high in the mouth, keeping the muscles of the tongue, lips and cheeks relaxed and making a voiced sound. It occurs in the same way in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. tipo /tIpU/ Eng. nit /bIt/

/ɛ/ - mid, front. That is, the mid part of the tongue is in the front of the mouth. It is produced by moving back the lips, then raising the tongue midway in the mouth, making a short voiced sound. It occurs in Brazilian Portuguese in the same way as in English, but only when it is stressed.

B.P. queda /kɛda/ Eng. guess /gɛs/

/e/ - mid, front. It is pronounced like the letter a in English and tends to be longer than / /. In Brazilian Portuguese it has the same pronounciation as the English e in the word they, but without the final /I/ glide.

B.P. dedo /dedU/ Eng. date /det/

/æ/ - low, front. The low part of the tongue is in the front of the mouth. It is produced by opening the mouth, making the tongue flat, emitting a voiced sound. It does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. cat /kæt/

/ɚ/ - It is the sound of stressed syllabic r in English. It is produced by a retroflexion of the tongue-tip toward the hard palate. This sound does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. her /hɚ/

/ə/ - It is the lax, central vowel that can occur in any position of a word. It is produced with the articulators in neutral position, that is, the lips are neither spread nor rounded and the tongue is neither forward nor back. It does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. cut /kət/

/u/ - high, back. It is made with the lips rounded and with the back of the tongue higher than for any other vowel. It is a long sound. This tense vowel /u/ does not occur in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. --- Eng. food /fud/

/U/ - high, back. It is produced by pushing the lips out slightly, raising the tongue midway in the mouth, making a short sound. It has the same characteristics in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. muda /mUda/ Eng. good /gUd/

/o/ - mid, back. This sound usually has a distinctive off-glide /U/ in many words in English. It is produced with the lips rounded, making a long "OH" sound. In Brazilian Portuguese it is pronounced without the /U/ glide, almost i- the same way as the o in the English word obey.

B.P. ovo /ovU/ Eng. over /ovɚ/

/ɔ/ - low, back. This sound is produced with the lips tense and protruded, while the tongue is in a low, mid-back position. It is almost the same sound in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. oca /ɔka/ Eng. law /lɔ/

/a/ - low, central. This sound is made with the mouth widly open; the lips are neither spread nor rounded and the tongue is low and lax. In Brazilian Portuguese it is the same sound as in English.

B.P. fado /fadU/ Eng. father /faðɚ/

Diphthongs

/aI/ - This diphthong is a combination of the sound /a/ as in father and the sound /I/ as in city. It occurs in the same way in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. pais /paIs/ Eng. ice /aIs/

/aU/ - This is a combination of the sound /a/ as in father and the sound /U/ as in book. It is the same diphthong in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. causa /kaUza/ Eng. out /aUt/

/ I/ - This diphthong is a combination of the sound of / / as in autumn and the sound of /I/ as in city. It is the same sound in Brazilian Portuguese.

B.P. doi /dɔI/ Eng. boy /bɔI/

III - SOME DIFFICULTIES

Considering the fact that all normal human beings have the organs of speech required to produce any sound in any language, it would be valid to say that everyone can easily make all these sounds. However, we must have in mind that the production of them in a language involves habits which are acquired in the childhood and reinforced since then by incessant practice.

In the previous section we could see, though in a superficial manner, that the Brazilian learner actually has problems in pronouncing some English sounds. This is caused by the lack of these sounds, the real difference in some of them, or even by the similarity found in others which leads him to think they are produced in the same way as in his native language.

To overcome such difficulties the learner should hear the new sound and see how it is produced in the mouth. Another important point is that it would be desirable if the teacher knew the sound system of the learner's language in order to, upon percieving the difficulty or misunderstanding in his pronunciation of these specific sounds, be able to avoid it by showing him the difference between them.

Basically, the difficulty of the Brazilian speaker lays on the production of the following sounds:

consonants - /p/, /t/, /k/, /d/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /r/, /d/, /ŋ/, /h/.

vowels - /i/, /æ/, /ə/, /ɔ/, /u/.

IV - AN ATTEMPT TO OVERCOME SUCH DIFFICULTY

1 - Methodological Aspects

Teaching the pronunciation of the sound system of a foreign language involves three basic steps, in which the student must be able to: (1) hear the sound, (2) identify the sound, and (3) produce the sound.

Based on this first consideration, let us show how it could be done in the case of teaching sounds which cause most difficulty to the Brazilian student.

The knowledge of the organs of speech and how they function in both languages (native and foreign) when making a sound is very important. Therefore, when the teacher first presents a sound to the student, he should demonstrate to him, by a diagram for instance, the position and the movement of the lips, tongue, etc. in this sound. If it similarly occurs in the student's native language, which may lead him to think it is the same sound he is used to produce, the teacher should point out the difference between them immediately, explaining the position and movement of the organs of speech in both languages. So it would be desirable for the teacher to know the two sound systems.

After the teacher had presented a sound (showing its difference in both language) using words in which it occurs, he teaches a contrasting sound (for example, /b/ if the first was /p/ in the same way. Then he repeats the pair of words several times to show the difference between them, and asks the student to recognize them by saying in what word each sound occurs.

The next step will be the pronunciation os these words by the student. Only now, after the recognition of the sounds in different words, is he able to produce them with a relative facility. However, the accuracy in the pronunciation is only acquired by constant practice. The teacher says the words in which the target sound occurs - let us take the sound /p/, for example - and the student repeats after him. The same process is applied for the contrasting sound /b/. Now the teacher says pair of words with /p/ and /b/ sounds, followed again by the student repetition.

Finally, the teacher says a word and the student is asked to give a word with the contrasting sound.

Basically, these are the principal steps in teaching sounds of a foreign language.

So far, we touched on just a strict part of the teaching process of a foreign language, that is, the aspects related to the production of sounds. Many other factors are involved in the thorough learning-teaching process, but those are beyond the scope of this work.

2. Exercises

This part of the work just contents exercises for the sounds pointed out in section III.

/p/

pen /pɛn/

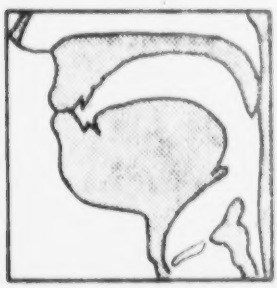
pound /paUnd/

people /pipəl/

please /pliz/

pencil /pɛnsəl/

pet /pɛt/



lip position for /p/

/t/

table /tebəl/

test /test/

tell /tɛl/

tea /ti/

tost /tost/

telephone /tɛləfon/

tongue position for /t/

/d/

desk /dɛsk/

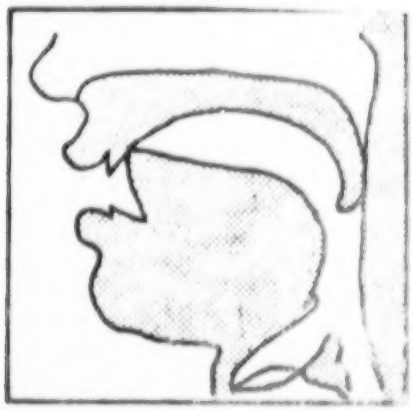
dentist /dɛntɪst/

drink /drɪnk/

dish /dɪʃ/

doctor /daktər/

day /de/



tongue position for /d/

/k/

car /kar/

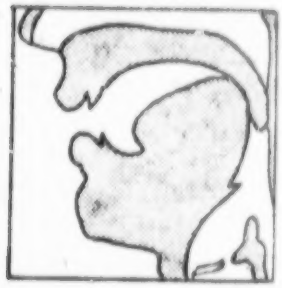
come /kʌm/

cold /kold/

coffee /kɔfi/

keep /kip/

cat /kæt/



tongue position for /k/

/θ/

thin /θɪn/

think /θɪŋk/

thank /θæŋk/

thing /θɪŋ/

thought /θɔt/

theater /θiətər/

tongue position for /θ/

/ð/

this /ðɪs/

that /ðæt/

father /faðər/

other /əðər/

then /ðɛn/

brother /brəðər/

tongue position for /ð/:
see page 20, sound /ð/

/r/

are /ar/

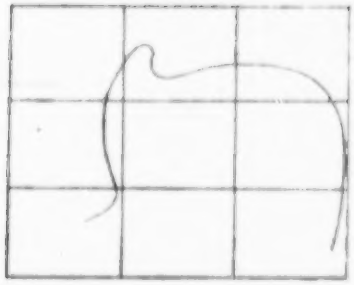
garden /gardən/

quarter /kwɔrtər/

careful /kɛrfʊl/

car /kar/

star /star/



tongue position for /r/

/dʒ/

just /dʒəst/

joke /dʒok/

James /dʒemz/

age /edʒ/

job /dʒab/

magic /mædʒɪk/

tongue position for /dʒ/

/ŋ/

walking /wɔkɪŋ/

bringing /brɪnɪŋ/

song /sɔŋ/

coming /kʌmɪŋ/

ring /rɪŋ/

king /kɪŋ/

tongue position for /ŋ/

/h/

hat /hæt/

headach /hɛdek/

husband /hʌzbənd/

hit /hɪt/

heat /hit/

hate /het/

the tongue and lips are in the position for the pronunciation of the vowel which follows /h/.

vowels

/i/

leave /liv/

sheep /ʃip/

beat /bit/

see /si/

meat /mit/

people /pip l/

____ tongue position for /i/

/æ/

man /mæn/

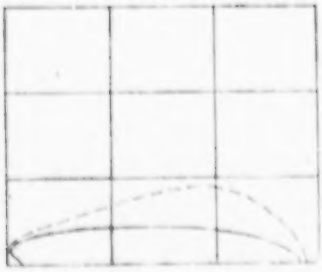
bad /bæd/

sad /sæd/

ask /æsk/

fast /fæst/

glass /glæs/



------Tongue position for /æ/

_____Tongue position for /a/

/ə/

but /bət/

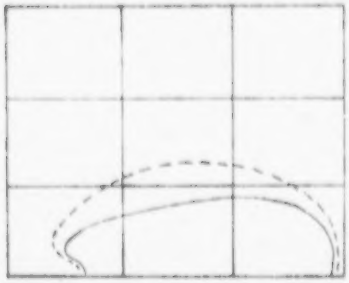
cup /kəp/

us /əs/

son /sən/

fun /fən/

gun /gən/



------Tongue position for /ə/

_____Tongue position for /ɔ/

/ɚ/

bird /bɚd/

word /wɚd/

work /wɚk/

girl /gɚl/

answer /ænsɚ/

learn /lɚn/

tongue position for /ɚ/:

see explaination on page 13.

/u/

spoon /spun/

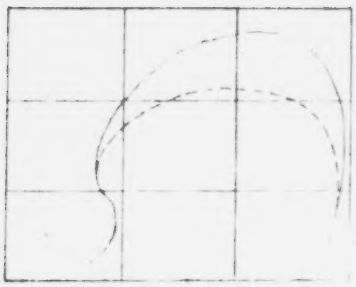
blue /blu/

food /fud/

room /rum/

flew /flu/

soon /sun/



_____Tongue position for /u/

------Tongue position for /U/

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